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ABSTRACT

The way in which teachers view teaching and learning and implications for the improvement of teaching were studied. A review of the relevant literature and of needs assessment reports based on teacher concerns was conducted, and interviews with faculty members were held. Suggestions based on preliminary results are offered. It is suggested that for many professors there is no recognition of pedagogy as a discipline, and some teachers appear to have difficulty in talking about, and perhaps in conceptualizing, teaching. Teaching is personal and identified with the teacher as a person, and some teachers discuss what they do in class with no reference to students. The most important need that teachers identified was time to increase content expertise. It is suggested that the underuse of instructional and faculty development resources may be related to the views that teaching is not a discipline and that teaching improvement is an individualistic activity requiring no expert assistance. Underuse may also be related to qualitatively different perceptions of teaching. (SW)

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PROFESSORS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT[1]

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Looking at the literature in Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology one cannot help but be impressed by the myriad variants in the human population that have been studied in detail by University researchers. Movie stars and housewives, child geniuses and retardates, the obese and the anorexic, Arctic Inuits and tropical Ibos. There is, however, one sub-group of the human species about whom little research has been conducted and relatively

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little is really known: paradoxically, the college and university professor! One can hear Senator Proxmire remark, as he looks over the latest Office of Education grants, "My God, they have run out of people to study, now they want money to study themselves."

But there is a need, a practical need, for information about this group of several hundred thousand persons. Especially now when there are mounting pressures for change and adjustment. Introducing and implementing such changes on campus will require better understanding of the faculty if transitions are to be smooth and minimally disruptive. More information about professors will be of special value to people like me, who work in instructional and faculty development centers, and who--- incidentally--preach to their clients (i.e., professors) the necessity of knowing and understanding the student.

Our project is just now underway so I will spend more time describing the purposes and procedures and look at the information obtained thus far briefly since it is scant.

Problem. The study grew out of the work we do as instructional and faculty developers. Almost universally people in our professions complain that they do not reach the majority of professors on their campuses. The magic

figure is a user rate of about 25% and, as one looks back over the years, the user group includes a very large number of repeaters (an observation analogous to reports in the literature or innovation, i.e. innovators continue to innovate). As a group, we have often assigned the causes to faculty resistance or lack of administrative support. But, perhaps, there is a real marketing problem. Maybe the majority of faculty members do not see a need for our services--at least the ones we present and the way in which we present them. We are not being actively resisted; we are simply irrelevant. With that in mind we undertook to examine in some depth how teachers view teaching and learning and the implications for attempts to improve teaching.

Why not just look at existing needs assessments? We are doing that, but we wanted to go beyond that since such assessments rarely indicate what rank the whole business of improvement has in the teacher's priority list. We felt that there was a need to relate basic perceptions of the teaching role and act to improvement efforts.

Procedures

1. Literature. To obtain information about how professors view teaching, learning, and teaching improvement, we have, of course, searched the available literature.

It consists of three types of reports:

- Prescriptions for good teaching (i.e., how to teach.)
- Self-reports by professors (usually designated as master teachers by themselves or others) on how they teach or should teach (e.g., Sheffield, 1974).
- Surveys, observations or interviews. Outstanding examples are books by Axelrod (1973), Eble (1972) and Wilson, et al. (1975).

2. Needs assessments. As indicated earlier many centers and campus committees have carried out some kind of needs assessment, usually by means of a questionnaire consisting of lists of activities and topics about which faculty members indicate their interest. We are collecting and reviewing such reports.

3. Interviews and workshops. We are carrying out a series of individual interviews with faculty members and following these up with luncheon discussions with small groups of interviewees. In addition, we plan to conduct several workshops.

I will describe each activity briefly but first let me indicate the population being sampled. At the moment Lee Davies and I are interviewing professors at Scarborough College, a part of the University of Toronto; Ron Smith is interviewing at Concordia University in Montreal. Further sampling will be done at McGill, at other colleges in the U. of T., at the University of Minnesota, and at community colleges in Quebec and Ontario. Interviewees

are chosen semi-randomly. An attempt is being made to cover the Arts and Sciences, the professional schools, and technical/vocational departments. Also we will try to balance years of experience in teaching. The total sample should number about 75 by the completion of this first study (in July or August.) Note that so far we have only been interviewing University faculty members. All interviews, incidentally, are tape-recorded.

The interviews at the two sites differ somewhat. Ron Smith's include probing questions on attribution of cause and perception of controls and responsibility whereas we probe more for specific improvement suggestions. However, the interviews share many common questions and the results can readily be compared. Interview questions are available as an Appendix to this report.

Interviews are arranged by letter and telephone. (There is, of course, a potential built-in sampling bias: some professors may not consent to be interviewed. But this has not yet happened.)

Interviews run from 30 minutes to an hour.

Follow-up luncheons are being planned for small groups of interviewees. These meetings have three purposes, first, to allow elaboration and correction of interview discussions. Second, to provide a chance to probe additional relevant areas (e.g., evaluation of teaching.) Third, to

observe the group interactions: are new perceptions generated? Does the group facilitate or inhibit certain discussions?

We also are planning some workshops incorporating our interview questions in exercises designed both to provide us with data and encourage insights in the participants.

Preliminary results. Each team has completed about half a dozen interviews. Consequently any results I comment on are impressionistic and may not be representative. But we do note a consistency between what we are finding and what is reported in the literature so we feel some confidence in offering these suggestions.

(1) At least with regard to statements about teaching, learning, and teaching improvement, it is not correct to speak of a faculty as if it were a homogeneous group. Professors express qualitatively different viewpoints. For example, in the same afternoon we talked to one professor who clearly identified teaching as one of life's major mysteries while the next interviewee began listing specific skills areas in which he would like to increase his competence.

(2) For many professors, we suspect, there is no recognition of pedagogy as a discipline. They may concede that some kind of teacher training is needed if one is to become a primary or secondary school teacher.

But in their eyes there is no area of knowledge and research in Higher Education instruction. That kind of teaching is best described as the result of content knowledge and enthusiasm. True, a few tricks may help make one a better teacher, but these can be acquired through experience. There are already exceptions to these generalizations, as there are to any of the ones I will make. But I am trying to convey our impressions of prevailing norms.

(3) Professors, we suspect, have difficulty in talking about, perhaps in conceptualizing, teaching. They do not talk about it with the detail, the objectivity or the expertise with which they talk about their subject matter--or, indeed, other topics with which they are familiar. It has been noted elsewhere that professors' verbal repertoires in this area may well be lean. Having had little or no formal training in Education or even exposure to the literature of the field, they may not have a wide repertoire of vocabulary and concepts.

Our interviewees have talked easily and at length. However, they move quickly into their area of content expertise--often turning a point they are making about teaching into a mini-lecture about course content. They do seem to lack systematic conceptualization or grounding in knowledge of learning theory. One ascribed good teaching

to magic; another suggests that it all boils down to inherent student motivation. An exception is a Psychology teacher we interviewed , but as well as his background in Psychology he had had formal training during his teaching assistantship both in pedagogical theory and practice.

(4) Teaching is personal and identified with the teacher as a person. We have noted the delicacy with which probes about teaching must be handled. Some professors prefer to talk about the teaching act rather than the teaching role. Perhaps this is because it somewhat depersonalizes the discussion. Or perhaps some do not view teaching as a role; to them it may be a series of activities a professor carries out--adjunctive to his role as knowledge seeker and generator. Furthermore,we find teaching is narrowly defined in terms of classroom performance. Counselling and evaluation do not seem to be core activities in this definition of teacher and teaching.

(5) Some professors focus solely on themselves in the teaching/learning process. They repeatedly discuss what <u>they</u> do in class with no reference to students. They report that they know when a class is a good one by how they feel afterwards, whether or not they were prepared, whether they had a smooth, well-organized presentation.

Other professors (so far in the minority) include students in their discussions. "I know it has been a good session because I hear the students buzzing together when I leave the room." Some professors stressed the need to maintain channels of student feedback in order to guide and improve their teaching.

(6) High on the priority list of things that would improve teaching, our interviewees put time to increase one's own content expertise. Ranking second is some kind of course improvement. And we have picked up a scattering of interest in improving presentation skills. However, almost no one has suggested that any improvement effort would require major input from an expert--either someone in education and instruction or a colleague in the same discipline. We were strongly impressed by the expressed "self-confidence" (or you may wish to use any of a number of other terms.) The message is clear: "Give me time and a small amount of resources and I'll do it myself."

We continue to be impressed by the highly individualistic, almost isolated approach, to teaching and its improvement that we have heard repeatedly in these interviews.

Final remarks. If teaching is not seen as a discipline; if teaching improvement is an individualistic activity requiring no expert assistance; if there are dramatic, qualitatively different, perceptions of teaching, learning, and teaching improvement, it is not surprising that instructional and faculty development resources are underused.

Certainly the people we have talked to and read about have, for the most part, not indicated a knowledge of (much less a need for or an appreciation of) the role and possible contributions of pedagogical specialists on campus. What most of us offer as workshops, newsletters and seminars would not seem to be eagerly awaited or hungrily consumed by many university teachers.

As disquieting are the implications for faculty evaluation. If the differences among teachers which we have found so far are representative, the complexity of a fair and acceptable evaluation system, it would seem, would have to be enormous.

But these final remarks need not be depressing. We feel that our work already suggests new approaches to instructional improvement activities, that we are at last getting to know our clients. Such knowledge cannot but help in planning instructional improvement and reasonable responses to the changes Higher Education faces in the 80's.

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APPENDIX
Please do not reproduce
I. Smith Interview

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GEIS/SMITH PAPER

INTERVIEW FORMAT

(REVISED FEB. 22, 1979)

1a) I would like you to think of the last class you taught, and tell me what signs do you look for, what indicators do you use to determine, to judge how successful it was?

1b) If you think of the last class you taught in your other courses this term, do you use the same signs on indicators. (If different explore why?)

1c) Now if instead of thinking about individual classes you think of courses - say the course for that first class we were talking about - what signs or indicators do you use to judge the degree of success of a course.

1d) Are they the same for the other courses you are teaching this term?

2a) What do you hope students will be able to do when they leave your course? What will they leave with as a result of having been in your course? How will your students be different as a result of having been in your courses?

2b) How do you see your methods of teaching working to accomplish that? To be more specific, what do you see yourself doing and what do you see the students doing in order to accomplish these ends?

3) Now I would like you to think of your most successful and least successful classes/courses this year and on this sheet of paper write down what you see as the causes - the critical variables in producing these outcomes. Try to be as specific as possible.

4) Now I would like you to try to position each of them on this grid in their relative place as you see them. The grid has two dimension. One goes from I can control it - I can't control it- it is beyond my control. The second one goes from hard to change/ unlikely to change to easy to change or likely to change.

5a) If you think back over the last 2 or 3 years can you think of things that you have done deliberately to change or improve the teaching/learning in your courses or of things that have indirectly or unintentionally lead to changes or improvements in your teaching/learning in your courses.

5b) If I could give you some free time/money or extra energy to work on improving the teaching and learning in your courses what would you do?

6) I have here a list of different services or activities that have been offered to faculty, some here and elsewhere to improve teaching and learning. I am going to describe each one briefly and ask you if you would consider using them and why or why not you think they might lead to an improvement in teaching and learning.

7) If you think of your view of teaching and learning: the criteria you use, the goals you have, the problems you see and the ways to improve them, have your views changed since you started teaching? In what ways?

8) We have been talking mostly about teaching and learning and how to improve it. I would like to know where you place teaching/learning and its improvements in the whole broad scheme of things. Would you devote extra time or money or energy to teaching improvement or are there other priorities for you?

9) I have here a description of seven different roles that faculty members play. Each of us give different emphasis to each of these roles in individual classes and courses. I would like you to read the descriptions and try to indicate what percentage of time you give to each of them. If you see yourself differently in different courses you might want to indicate that as well by giving two distributions of time.

10) And finally some biographic data.

Numbers of years teaching:

Tenured

Department Division Faculty

I want to thank you for your time, cooperation and thoughtfulness. Do you have any questions or comments.

1. TOPIC: Teaching

Professors differ in the ways they describe their teaching roles. For example, while one professor may see himself primarily an information presenter, another sees himself as a model of scholarship and research, and a third emphasizes his role as a facilitator of student growth. Without limiting yourself to these examples, how would you describe yourself as a teacher, your role as a teacher, your purpose and goals, etc.?

Probes:

PURPOSE (1) To be more specific about goals: what do you set out to accomplish with your students - what are the major purposes of your teaching?

NATURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

(2) Some people view teaching in college and university as very different than teaching at the primary and secondary levels. Others would stress common characteristics in all teaching. How do you feel about this?

COMPREHENSIVE VIEW

(3) Although "teaching" usually is defined in terms of face-to-face classroom instruction, professors have a lot of other responsibilities. For example, they are evaluators of student learning and they counsel and advise. How do you view these functions? How have you prepared for them (e.g. developing test materials)?

PRIORITY

(4) Teaching is said to be a major purpose of a college or university. But people disagree as to its priority. If you had to rank order the priorities of a university where would you place undergraduate teaching? Graduate

2. TOPIC: "Good" teaching

Both as student and teacher, you have experienced examples of good and bad teaching. Thinking of successful teaching episodes and good teachers you've known, what would you say were the characteristics of a "good" teacher?

SYMPTOMS OF SUCCESS

(1) More specifically, continuing to think of successful teaching episodes, what happened that makes you call those episodes a success?

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

(2) What did you and what did the students contribute to it? (Other contributing factors?)

FAILURES

(3) Now, thinking of a less successful episode, let's go through those questions again.

- why do you call it a failure?
- what teacher-linked factors were responsible or missing?
- what were the student-linked factors?

3. TOPIC: Student Learning

Let's switch for a moment from teacher to student. (We've touched on what makes a good or poor student, would you elaborate on that for me?) Describe an ideal student.

CHARACTERISTICS

(1) What specific characteristics make up a good student?

CHANGES

(2) What changes or accomplishments could you observe which would lead you to say at the end of a course - he or she was a good student or at least accomplished a lot this term?

FAILURES

(3) Let's run over those same questions thinking this time of a poor student.

RESPONSIBILITY

(4) There is a difference of opinion on how responsible the professor is for the amount of learning that takes place in a class. How much of the responsibility for learning lies with the student and how much with the professor?

4. TOPIC: Improving Teacher (personal)

We've discussed several factors which contribute to good teaching. Some of them may be amenable to improvement, others may not. Comment on the cliché "good teachers are born, not made".

ABLE TO CHANGE

(1) Which specific characteristics seem amenable to development or improvement?

UNABLE TO CHANGE

(2) Which ones appear not to be (practically) amenable to improvement?

ADVICE TO ANOTHER TEACHER

(3) If a teacher came to you for advice on how to become a better teacher, briefly what would you say?

MAINTAINING QUALITY

(4) What do you do to maintain the quality of your teaching?

IMPROVING YOUR TEACHING

(5) What do you do to improve your teaching?

5. TOPIC: Improving Teaching (institutional)

Have you ever consulted with (or asked advice from) others on improving your teaching (a colleague, a specialist?) Describe the experience.

(1) Are you aware of any teaching improvement centre or committee on your campus? Have you ever contacted it? What happened if you did?

(2) What obstacles, if any, have interfered with your efforts to improve your teaching?

6. TOPIC: Teaching Improvement Program

If tomorrow you could start a program to improve your teaching (or courses) what aspect of it would you work on? How would you go about doing it?

(1) Suppose you could obtain the services of a consultant to assist you in improving your teaching, ideally what kinds of consultant do you think would be useful to you?